

ITINERARIUM SACRI AMORIS: THE ROAD TO GOD IN

Ramon Llull's *Blanquerna*

The works of Ramon Llull, the Catalan philosopher of the 13th century, all have a common goal: to teach and guide the people of his times, Christians or unbelievers, along the path that ultimately leads to God and salvation in eternal life. Llull's production is vast and enormously varied: from thoroughly philosophical works, such as the *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem*¹, to doctrinal ones, as the *Libre de Sancta Maria*², to literary works such as the romance *Blanquerna*. And it is precisely this last work, *Blanquerna*, a literary rendition of Llull's beliefs, that concerns us.

Blanquerna, possibly written between 1282 and 1287³, embodies one of Llull's most constant preoccupations, the accessibility of the Christian doctrines to the masses and the necessity to teach people the right approach to God. Aware that not everyone is equipped to understand "pure theology", in this romance Llull tries to incorporate in a narrative philosophical and theological concepts and to show their relevance to the daily practice of Christianity. Accordingly, the romance *Blanquerna* works on two different but interdependent levels, the literal and the theological-allegorical.

1. Llull, Ramon, *Art abreuçada de trovar veritat. Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem seu Ars magna et maior*. Mallorca, 1273-1275.

2. *Libre de Sancta Maria. Liber de laudibus Beate Mariae*. Montpellier, ca. 1290-1291.

3. *Libre de Evast e de Aloma e de Blanquerna. Liber Blanquerna*. Montpellier, ca. 1282-1287.

On the literal level, *Blanquerna* recounts the adventures of Blanquerna, a young man from a rich family who abandons his inheritance and the possibility of a respectable life with a good marriage to search for a place of retirement to devote himself to the contemplation of God. As Blanquerna leaves his city it becomes apparent that the romance is set up in the traditional manner of the hero-tales, where we will follow the adventures of a champion. But here the context has been changed, and the Christian hero will have to confront moral struggles that take the place of the physical warfare of the older tales. Thus Blanquerna goes through a series of moral combats on his way to God. First he encounters the temptation of inordinate obedience when his parents want him to stay with them. In order to follow his vocation and pursue the road to God, he has to disobey. Later Blanquerna battles against the temptation of lust, personified by the woman his parents want him to marry. In addition, he has to fight against arrogance when he becomes famous for his piety. As he defeats these first enemies, Blanquerna is well on his way along the road and has earned a rest. This comes when he finds a forest, the typical "locus amenus" of the Middle Ages, where the full allegorical format of the romance is first revealed. In this "locus amenus" there is a palace inhabited by the Ten Commandments. These, represented by ten ailing old men, lament the condition of contemporary society and the total oblivion in which they have fallen. The Ten Commandments urge Blanquerna to struggle for the betterment of humanity and to try to make men follow the Decalogue. Refreshed and instructed, Blanquerna leaves the forest and continues on his pilgrimage. He then meets two other personifications, Faith and Truth, who introduce him to a third one, their brother, Reason. They too lament the abandonment of humanity and the decaying of Christianity. The presentation of Faith and Reason here as members of the same family illustrates one of Lull's major postulates, that Faith and Reason are necessary companions, since men cannot fully believe without knowledge, and since "the one that understands the most believes most".

Outfitted with all this new knowledge, Blanquerna proceeds on his quest for a hermitage. Along the road he finds a vanished emperor who has lost faith. Blanquerna consoles him, talks about the rewards offered by Christian virtue and fortitude and heads him along the road of Christian living. He does the same with a desperate shepherd and a fallen knight. All of them, after meeting Blanquerna and talking to him, return to the path of God. Thus in his journey the hero has now reached the stage of active battle. Blanquerna, the Champion of the Lord, is gaining converts to Christianity in intellectual jousts at the same time that he himself advances toward God.

Now comes a new trial for Blanquerna. he is again tempted by lust, in

4. *Libro de Evast y Blanquerna*. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1958), p. 264.

the person of the damsel whom he saved from the fallen knight. Through prayer and discipline Blanquerna emerges victorious from this incident and at the same time succeeds in leading her to the ways of virtue. More than ever Blanquerna longs now for the solitary life of prayer, but he is still far from achieving it. He is compelled to enter a monastery as the servant of a tyrannical master, but little by little, through reason and example, he manages to transform the tyrant into a Christian practitioner. The prior of the monastery, impressed by Blanquerna's learning and piety, argues with him about the necessity of serving within the church and becoming a monk. Blanquerna resists the arguments because his true vocation lies in the solitary life. He accedes however, when the prior invokes the virtue of obedience and stresses the necessity to serve humanity directly by action before retiring to contemplative adoration. From then on Blanquerna's career within the church is meteoric. He goes from sacristan to abbot, to bishop and finally becomes Pope, setting examples at each level and reaching an ever growing number of people as his influence widens. But every step up the hierarchical organization is agonizing for Blanquerna, since he has to deny himself his vocation for solitude in order to serve others. He visualizes every advancement as a step farther away from the solitary enjoyment of God. But even if painful, Blanquerna performs his public ministry exceptionally well. He gains recruits for Christianity. He simplifies the organization of the Church, transforms prayers into instruments of active Christian living, sends out missionaries to spread the word of God, writes treatises on the application of theological principles to everyday life and finally reorganizes the Church completely, giving first priority to service, humility and the conversion of the infidels. Soon after, Blanquerna's fame has spread throughout the world. The unification of the universe under a single faith, one of Lull's constant preoccupations, is already taking place when Blanquerna, much older now, abdicates the papacy and resumes his search for a hermitage. Even in his retirement, Blanquerna is followed by the faithful. In his contemplative life, Blanquerna not only finds a closer relationship with God, but also succeeds in conveying the nature of this relationship to others. Thence his simple life of prayer and gardening is completed by the composition of his final work, the *Book of the Lover and the Beloved*⁵. Here Blanquerna describes the mystical encounter with God and the achievement of his goal of a life lived in the constant and intimate companionship with God.

5. *Libre d'amic e Amat. Liber amici et amati*. Mallorca, ca. 1282-1287. Included in *Blanquerna* as Blanquerna's last work.

Llull's *Blanquerna* then, is a highly allegoric and complex work that expresses his ideas about theology and the Church. The work tries to entertain its readers while edifying them, and also maps out effectively the road to be followed by any person that longs for God.

As an expository vehicle for his ideas, Llull uses the very medieval convention of disguising learning material as entertainment. The figure of *Blanquerna* represents at the same time Christ, the perfect hero and Everyman. As Christ, *Blanquerna* lives an obedient but revolutionary life, bending his own desires, sacrificing his own will, saving others, working always for the ultimate good of humanity and charting an indelible road to God.

As the perfect hero, *Blanquerna* gives the traditional figure of the champion a thoroughly Christian and benign context. He goes through all the prescribed steps: First he is called to the road, he (2) retires to the wilderness to learn about the world and about himself. Then (3) he comes back to public life reluctantly to work for the betterment of man and (4) at the end of his career he retires again to find himself closer to his goal, in this case, God⁶. As a Christian hero *Blanquerna* wages moral battles, not physical ones. The jousts of the ancient knights become encounters of words and ideas. The monsters and giants are transformed into sin and disobedience. The hero's invincible weapon is not a magical sword but an unwavering faith in God. Therefore, to a public accustomed to heroics, *Blanquerna* is a familiar figure, although acting in a different and loftier context. And this familiarity with his heroics when their context is transferred to the theological and religious world of the 13th century, renders the figure of *Blanquerna* plausible and acceptable to the reader. And this acceptance has another important facet: while the traditional heroes of the sagas are people apart from everyday life, separated from reality by the mighty events that they perform, *Blanquerna*, working within a Christian context of sin and disobedience, is much more immediate and therefore can be imitated. People can grasp the meaning of his battles and emulate his itinerary toward God. He is, besides a hero, an everyman's hero who serves as a role model whose stride fits the common person. Since Christ promises love to everyone and since *Blanquerna*'s only weapon is his faith in this love of Christ, *Blanquerna*'s achievements and his quest for divine love, that is marked by obedience, virtue and faith, is open to everyone. And everyone who prays and studies can also achieve union with God.

This everyone-ness is the third advocacy of *Blanquerna*. As a mortal of known origins he differs from the traditional hero endowed with secret powers. *Blanquerna* is the Everyman who, by following the road of divine love, achieves

6. For a more detailed discussion of the hero, see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

perfection in Christ. Clearly visible in his life, this road is marked by eight ascending steps toward God: 1) self denial, 2) obedience, 3) learning about God and His laws, 4) service to others on the personal level, 5) service to humanity through the organized Church, 6) use of prayer as a guidance to action, 7) application of theological principles to everyday life, 8) constant pursuit of the will of God. These eight steps can be exercised in all walks of life. Above all, Blanquerna summarizes three principles that illuminate the road to perfection: prayer, learning and service. He pivots his journey on these principles to reach his destination. And, according to Llull, anyone who follows the road of Blanquerna can reach the full presence of God.

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